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ABSTRACT

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 authorized a comprehensive workforce improvement program that will significantly impact rural areas. Local schools can help shape implementation of WIA because of its principles of local participation, increased skills for workers, and improved youth programs. This digest focuses on WIA's major elements, with particular reference to the role that rural schools can play in local and statewide implementation planning. WIA seeks to invest in efforts that increase participants' employment and earnings, increase workers' occupational skills, help improve worker quality, and reduce welfare dependency. Rural schools have a host of youth development resources rarely present in other locally-based rural institutions. In addition, rural schools may be the most convenient sites for WIA's one-stop adult centers. Rural school administrators can be key players in WIA's implementation if they are willing to support the notion that rural schools are vital resources for meeting the workforce development needs of their communities. Program components of particular interest to rural educators are described: (1) local youth councils, characteristics of targeted youth, and required youth activities; (2) one-stop delivery system for adults (core, intensive, and training services); and (3) individual training accounts. Opportunities for rural participation in decision making on state and local workforce investments boards are discussed. Eight relevant Web sites are listed. (SV)

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Rural Schools and the *Workforce Investment Act*

by Lionel J. Beaulieu

The *Workforce Investment Act* (WIA) of 1998 authorized the establishment of one of the most comprehensive workforce improvement programs ever enacted. It will have significant impacts on rural areas, including rural minority populations such as American Indians and Alaska Natives, Latinos, and migrants. Local schools can help shape WIA because of the principles of local participation, increased skills for workers, and improved youth programs.

WIA is intended to mobilize states and localities to design and implement creative employment programs for current workers, potential employees, and local employers. It is also intended to strengthen the knowledge and skills of public assistance recipients, such as those receiving food stamps, so they can compete more effectively for better-paying jobs.

This Digest focuses on WIA's major elements, with particular reference to the role rural schools can play in influencing the local and statewide implementation planning.

WIA's Purpose and Structure

WIA embodies four major goals: (1) investing in efforts that increase participants' employment, retention, and earnings; (2) increasing occupational skills of those entering the workforce investment system; (3) helping improve worker quality to enhance America's workforce productivity and competitiveness; and (4) reducing welfare dependence by giving individuals skills to move effectively into the workforce.

States were required to begin implementing WIA by July 1, 2000. Once the WIA system was in place in a state, the *Job Training Partnership Act* (JTPA) ended; local workforce investment boards superseded JTPA's Private Industry Councils (PICs).

Role for Rural Schools in Local Workforce Investment Efforts

By studying the underlying elements associated with the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, school administrators and faculty should envision themselves as key players in the implementation of this act at the local level. Given the wealth of knowledge, expertise, and experiences that they bring to the table regarding youth development, school officials can play a major role in helping design workforce development and training models that best fit the needs of local youth being targeted as part of the WIA legislation. Information about various boards and planning mechanisms in which rural educators could participate is outlined at the end of this Digest.

Furthermore, rural schools possess a host of resources that are rarely present in other locally-based institutions. These include a significant pool of well-educated faculty, meeting facilities, state-of-the art computer technology, educational materials, courses, and engaged parents and business leaders. Such assets can position rural schools to be central players in the delivery of programs that facilitate the preparation of youth for entrance into the world of work. Among the activities that schools could provide to WIA targeted youth include: enhancement of study skills through after-school tutoring; career exploration, guidance and development; job shadowing, mentorship, and internship programs; and placement in summer employment opportunities.

At the same time, WIA offers schools a unique opportunity to step up their role in supporting a broader array of workforce improvement activities intended for adults living in their communities. Since many workforce investment areas that have been established in states encompass a large number of counties, many rural adults needing the services of a one-stop center may be physically located too far from such a facility. But, these individuals are likely to reside within a reasonable distance to a rural school. This suggests that rural schools can serve as key sites for extending core, intensive, and training services to local adults, particularly during the evening and weekend periods. This can be realized if school administrators are willing to support the notion that rural schools are vital resources that must be used to support the broader economic and workforce development needs of the communities in which they are located.

Program Components of Particular Interest to Rural Educators

Local youth councils. WIA focuses on youth, particularly those with economic, physical, and social challenges. WIA tries to marshal resources to help youth progress educationally and obtain workplace skills.

WIA makes youth councils into subgroups of local workforce investment boards. The councils comprise board members with expertise or interest in youth development or policy. Other members may include representatives of youth-serving organizations (including educators and juvenile justice agencies), local public housing authorities, Job Corps representatives, parents of youth seeking assistance, persons with recognized experience in youth activities, and youth. Local workforce investment boards, in consultation with chief elected officials from investment areas, appoint council members.

The youth council is the major architect of the local board's strategic plan for youth. The council also submits recommendations to the board regarding eligible providers of youth activities and oversees providers' services.

Youth programs and services target low-income youth aged 14-21 who fall into at least one of the following categories: deficient in basic literacy skills, dropout, behind in grade level, disabled, pregnant or a parent, homeless, runaway, foster child, criminal offender, or in need of added assistance to complete an education program or acquire and retain employment. At least 30 percent of funds devoted to youth initiatives must be dedicated to assisting local youngsters who are not enrolled in school.

Entities selected as providers of youth programs and services must promote educational progress and/or workforce preparation. WIA states that targeted youth must have the following opportunities:

- tutoring, study skills training, and instruction that result in completion of high school (includes drop-out prevention activities)

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- access to and involvement in alternative high school programs
- work experiences, paid or unpaid, with area employers, including organized internships and job shadowing programs
- summer employment opportunities that promote academic and occupation-related learning
- appropriate occupational skills training
- linking youth with adult mentors for at least one year
- comprehensive guidance and counseling to help youth make informed choices regarding academic and/or occupational pursuits
- leadership development to build self-confidence and the capacity to work with others (includes community service and peer-centered activities that encourage positive, responsible behavior during non-school hours)

One-stop delivery system for adults. WIA's one-stop delivery system is aimed at adults and dislocated workers aged 22-72. Every local workforce investment area must have a one-stop center located within that local area. These could be operated in conjunction with school family service centers. Affiliated sites, which also could be located in schools, may offer physical, electronic, or technological access to the area's one-stop center.

The one-stop system contains three levels: core services, intensive services, and training services. Core services are available to anyone aged 22-72, but individuals must meet certain conditions to gain access to intensive or training services.

Core services include

- outreach activities by one-stop operators to orient adults and dislocated workers to information and services available through the one-stop center;
- initial assessment of the skills, aptitudes, and abilities;
- career counseling, job search, and job placement assistance;
- access to accurate employment statistics for local, regional, and national labor markets (includes job vacancies, skills needed for these jobs, local occupations in demand, and the wages and skill requirements for these local employment slots); and
- information on local support services, such as child care and transportation, and referral to these services.

Intensive services are limited to unemployed adults who have been unable to find employment after using the core services. The one-stop operator must designate such persons as being in need of more in-depth job-related assistance. Intensive services also are offered to employed individuals who may need intensive services to secure or retain jobs that could give them economic self-sufficiency. Intensive services include comprehensive and specialized assessments of individuals' skill levels and service needs; development of individual work plans, group counseling, individual counseling and career planning; and short-term vocational services, including communication and interviewing skills, punctuality, and work conduct.

Training services are limited to adults and dislocated workers who, in the judgment of one-stop operators, need more indepth services than those offered as part of "intensive services." If resources for an adult employment and training program are limited, the local workforce investment board must request that one-stop operators give priority to low-income individuals and public assistance recipients.

Individual training accounts. The process for establishing local training services is important. First, the one-stop system operator must develop a list of eligible training providers and information on past performance and costs for their training services. Each qualified adult then selects a training services provider from the list and is given an individual training account (ITA) to help pay for the program that best meets his or her needs or interests. WIA lets states establish reciprocal relationships so one-stop providers can accept ITAs from other states.

Opportunities for Rural Participation in Decision Making

State workforce investment boards. Each governor established a state workforce investment board. The board's chair and a majority of members represent state businesses. Other members include chief elected local officials and legislators, as well as representatives from labor organizations; youth-serving organizations (such as schools); community colleges and community-based organizations; the lead WIA state agency; and state agencies with related missions.

Responsibilities of these boards include (1) assisting the governor in developing a detailed five-year statewide workforce investment plan, including activities that address needs of special populations, such as low-income youth; (2) monitoring the workforce investment system and exploring strategies to refine state activities; (3) designating local workforce investment areas and reviewing plans by local workforce investment boards; (4) determining the formula for allocating WIA funds to workforce investment areas; and (5) developing and improving state performance measures, including documenting how needs of special populations have been met and whether participants and employers are satisfied. The state board also must help the governor develop a statewide labor market information system outlining current and projected employment opportunities, skills required for capturing employment opportunities, workforce skills and economic development needs, and the types and availability of workforce investment activities.

Local workforce investment areas and boards. Choosing local workforce investment areas is largely the purview of each governor and state workforce investment board with input from local elected officials (such as county supervisors/commissioners) and other public entities, such as schools. Functions of local boards include submitting to the governor a strategic plan for local workforce investment; selecting one-stop operators and providers of youth services; identifying and approving eligible providers of training and intensive services; preparing a budget; overseeing activities; helping develop performance measures to document progress toward meeting local workforce needs; helping develop a local labor market information system; and challenging employers to hire individuals who have sought help from the local one-stop services system, particularly those from special populations.

Conclusion

The 1998 *Workforce Investment Act* empowers local areas with a major voice in shaping WIA. The success of this landmark legislation depends on active involvement and commitment of school, community, and business leaders, government officials, organizations, and citizens representing all segments of the community. Rural schools have a crucial role to play in WIA, helping to respond to local workforce needs and providing services to local youth and adults.

Learning More About the WIA

The following Web-based resources were available at the time of publication of this Digest. This list will be kept up-to-date in the on-line version of this Digest (http://www.ael.org/eric/rural/).

Interstate Conference of Employment Security Agencies, Center for Employment Security Education and Research. http://www.icesa.org/

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development.
http://heldrich.rutgers.edu

National Alliance of Business.
http://www.nab.com/Content/WorkforceDevelopment/WorkforceInvestmentAct/index.htm

National Association of State Workforce Board Chairs.
http://www.subnet.nga.org/workforcecouncilchairs/index.htm

National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices.
http://nga.org/CBP/Activities/WorkforceDev.asp
http://nga.org/Workforce/WIAOneStopPartners.htm

National Youth Employment Coalition. http://www.nyec.org

U.S. Department of Agriculture. http://www.reeusda.gov/wfp

U.S. Department of Labor Employment & Training Administration
http://usworkforce.org/ (15 November 1999).

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